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THE RIGHTS OF RUSSIA
TO LITHUANIA
AND WHITE-RUTHENIA

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THE RIGHTS OF RUSSIA TO LITHUANIA AND WHITE-RUTHENIA

In a memorial presented to the Peace Conference, certain Russians demand that the future of the provinces which before the war formed part of the Russian Empire, be not prejudged, with the exception of the Kingdom of Poland, as constituted by the Congress of Vienna in 1815. This therefore applies also to Lithuania and White-Ruthenia, and the argument requires that these provinces should continue to belong to Russia. This problem is considered in the same light in several pamphlets recently published in Paris by the « Russian Political Conference ».

The Russians repudiate every suspicion of imperialism, and if they would have us believe them, they must furnish some other foundation for their claims than merely the desire to keep whatever the Tsars have conquered.

We should therefore examine more closely the Russian pretensions concerning Lithuania and White-Ruthenia, their ethnographic and historical rights, and their merits with regard to the economic and cultural development of these provinces.

I. — The Historical rights of Russia.

At the present moment more than one nation is urging historical rights as the basis of the vindication of territories in dispute. And the principle must be recognized; it has even already received, in several cases, the sanction of competent authorities. Let us, however, first establish in what conditions it is permitted to speak of historical rights in general. To this

we reply that historical rights may be alleged whenever a State has possessed a certain territory for a considerable period in the past, so that this territory formed really an essential part of that State, and was wrested from it later by force, to be incorporated into another State.

What are then the historical rights of Russia to Lithuania and White-Ruthenia? When, and by virtue of what, did they come into her possession?

At the moment of the first partition of Poland, in 1772, Russia appropriated that part of White Ruthenia which is situated at the eastern borders of the Dvina and the Dnieper, and by the following partitions in 1793 and 1795, she annexed the rest of White Ruthenia and ethnographic Lithuania. From that time up to the Great War these provinces were under her domination.

We therefore see that what some would wish to call the « historical rights » of Russia, are of very recent date, and what is more, that they are based on an act of violence, to which Poland fell a victim at the end of the XVIII century.

Lithuania was never before under Russian domination. The Lithuanian State, formed in the XIII century by King Mendog and consolidated in the XIV century by the Grand Duke Giedymin, had been united to Poland ever since 1386 by virtue of a personal Union, and since 1569 by virtue of a real Union, and together they formed « the Republic of Poland » up to 1791, at which date the two States, which until then were united, but had separate governments, became one State, homogeneous and indivisible. Russian domination over Lithuania and Wilno, in the time of King John-Casimir, in the XVII century, lasted only a few years, when Russia, availing herself of the Swedish invasion in Poland, seized these provinces. When the Swedes were repulsed, the Russians had to leave these territories without delay. Can Russia found her historical rights on such a frail basis?

Even the White-Ruthenian provinces which Russia acquired by the partitions of Poland, had never before formed part of the Russian State. First of all they were united to the Lithuanian State successively in the XIII and XIV centuries, usually by the peaceful enthronement of Lithuanian princes, while the Muscovite State — which later

became Russian — was starting its career. When the frontiers of Muscovy came into contact with those of the Lithuanian State, the White Ruthenian provinces belonging to Lithuania, and situated on the borders of the two States, became the object of numerous wars. On the whole, however, Poland succeeded in retaining permanent possession of most of the territories in dispute up to the end of her political existence, if one excepts short periods of temporary Russian possession. But if such essentially military occupations of White-Ruthenian territories are to be considered as the basis of Russian historical rights, Poland could just as reasonably claim Moscow, which she occupied at the beginning of the XVIIth century (1610-1613).

And Russia affirmed expressly and repeatedly, that she did not claim Ruthenian territories which formed part of the Polish Republic. When Poland, by the Treaty of Polanow (1634), recognized Michel Fiedorowicz as « the autocratic Czar of all Muscovite Russias », the Treaty expressly stipulated the following restriction : « this title giving him no rights to the Ruthenians, who belong *ab antiquo* to Poland ». Catherine II also, who took the title of « Empress of all the Russias » declared through her ambassador in Warsaw that she « claims no rights, either for herself, her successors, or her Empire, to the countries and territories which, under the name of Russia or Ruthenia, belong to Poland and the Grand Duchy of Lithuania ».

II. — The Ethnographic Rights of Russia.

There is no difference in the Russian language between the terms « Russian » and « Ruthenian ». Thus, by dexterously juggling with the words, more than one Russian author tries to produce the impression that the White Ruthenians are Russians. This is a deliberate falsification of facts. The White-Ruthenians are a Slav population, differing from the Russians as regards their language. While it is true that the Russian, Ukrainian and White-Ruthenian dialects are considered by linguists as forming part of the same eastern group of Slavonic languages, it must certainly be recognized that

White-Ruthenian is a distinct language. Furthermore, it must be remembered that the White-Ruthenian vocabulary is saturated with Polish words, and that it is more easily understood by Poles than by Russians. The White-Ruthenians are also nearer to the Poles than to the Russians, by their secular union with Poland, by the influence of Polish civilization, more advanced than their own, and because of their daily contact with the Poles. This goes so far that the White-Ruthenians, who are Roman Catholics, pray in Polish from prayer-books printed in Polish. The Polish language is for them the official and ceremonial language, while the White-Ruthenian is the familiar idiom, just as a French peasant speaks the patois of his province at home or with his neighbours, reserving the use of French for more important occasions. Catholic White-Ruthenians consider themselves mostly as Poles.

The Russian language was, and still is, a language quite foreign to White-Ruthenians. Lehtonen, the Finnish historian, establishes that after the first Partition of Poland, the Russian authorities were obliged to use the Polish language in these territories in communications addressed to the population, because no one understood Russian, which was first used. Even the Germans almost invariably employed the Polish language in their official enunciations all over White-Ruthenia, not excepting the Eastern borders, and used the White-Ruthenian language only exceptionally. Finally, it must be remembered that in the few books printed in the White-Ruthenian language, the Latin alphabet was used as often as the cyrillic.

And if we distinguish these two ethnographic elements, the Russian and White-Ruthenian, so dissimilar in the eyes of impartial science, we may well ask ourselves what numerical force is represented by the Russian element in these provinces. Does it form there compact masses, or, if the true Russians are scattered, is their number important? Let us examine the figures of the only Russian census of 1897, which distinguished the Russians from the White-Ruthenians.

The percentage of true Russian inhabitants in 1897 was as follows :

In the government of Wilno.	5,00 %
— — — Kowno	4,82 %
— — — Grodno	5,08 %
— — — Mińsk.	4,39 %
— — — Mohylów	3,65 %
— — — Witebsk.	3,32 %

During the German occupation this percentage decreased, because the Russians, whom nothing retained, had, almost all of them, left the country.

This small percentage of Russians is explained by the fact that among the Russian population, arising exclusively from immigration, permanent settlement was rare. Russia tried to saturate these provinces with Russians by all possible means : by giving property confiscated from the Poles to Russians ; by the colonization of Russian peasants ; by the almost exclusive nomination of Russians to State functions, with the attribution of special advantages and facilities. In this way it was possible to retain functionaries, but almost no representatives of other professions. It is noticeable that efforts to retain the Russians by donations of landed property were not successful : almost all of them became absentees, drawing incomes from their estates which they were always ready to give up ; so that, when Poles were forbidden to acquire land belonging to Russians (1865), in default of buyers, the sale price fell considerably, although the authorities spared neither trouble nor money to facilitate such purchases for the Russians, (in founding, for instance, in these provinces, in 1866 a « Society of Russian buyers of landed property ».)

III. — Russia as the Protector of Lithuania and White-Ruthenia.

But if Russia has neither historical nor ethnographic rights to these provinces, she may, in protecting them and in favouring their cultural and economical development, have acquired other rights. Eloquent legal and statistical testimony enlightens us concerning the manner of this protection.

1. — **The protection of nationalities.** We need not linger over relations between the Russian administration and the Polish population. The name of Muravieff the Hangman, and the massacres of Krože, made in their time an enormous impression in the whole of Europe. We need not mention the prohibition of the Polish language in the courts, in administration, in the schools, and even in the streets; the deportation of the Poles, the confiscation of their property, the persecution of the Catholic Church as the Polish cult, etc., because Russia was fighting the Poles for the possession of these provinces.

But how did she protect the Lithuanians and the White-Ruthenians? The employment of the Lithuanian and the White-Ruthenian languages in courts of law and administration were forbidden, except in so far as they were indispensable to make one's self understood by the native population, ignorant of any other idiom but its own. Neither the Lithuanian nor the White-Ruthenian language were tolerated in the elementary schools, to say nothing of the secondary schools. Only the very lowest rank in administrative service was open to the natives; indeed, their very elementary education would have been a sufficient hindrance to all advancement. Since 1864, the printing of books in Lithuanian was only authorized in cyrillic characters. The extremely scanty Lithuanian literature then emigrated to Eastern Prussia, whence it endeavoured to penetrate subreptitiously to Lithuania. These restrictions concerning the printing of books were not abolished until 1905.

The whole population of this province was, during a period of several decades, deprived by the Russian government of the autonomic representation, called "zemstvos", already established in the central governments of Russia in 1864. These institutions were not introduced into this province until 1903, but their members were nominated by the government, and not elected by the population, as was the case in all the rest of Russia. In 1911, elections to the zemstvos were introduced, but only in three governments, to the exclusion of the other three (Kowno, Grodno, Wilno), and even then electoral rights suffered considerable restrictions.

2. — **The protection of education**, extended by Russia to these provinces, is revealed by the following figures : in 1831, in the educational administration of Wilno — when the activity of the Poles, who not long before had been removed from its direction, was still felt — there were 46 secondary schools with 7.175 pupils, and one university. In 1861, Szirinskij-Szichmatow, school inspector of Wilno, could record only 26 high schools with 5871 pupils (Korniłow, Russian work in the western provinces.) And the number of schools, as well as the number of pupils, was continually diminishing. In 1868, in 11 gymnasiums, there were 2.578 pupils, while seven years before there were 4.123. The attendance at the elementary schools also grew less and less. Between 1881 and 1893, the total number of pupils fell from 111.457 to 94.464, in spite of a general increase in the population. So that while (according to M. Schmid, the Russian historian), in 1808, the school district of Wilno (which at that time embraced also the Ukraine), had more pupils than all the rest of the immense Empire of the Tsars, immediately before the war the number of pupils to every thousand inhabitants was as follows :

In the government of Wilno	22,6
— — — Kowno	21,1
— — — Grodno	42,0
— — — Mińsk	42,2
— — — Witebsk	43,3
— — — Mohylów	56,0

that is, 37,9 per thousand on an average, while the same percentage in the central Russian governments was 54,3 per thousand.

To conclude, we must remember that after the disappearance of the University of Wilno, closed by the Russians in revenge for the Polish insurrection of 1831, all this immense country, 300.000 km², with a population of twelve and a half million, possessed no higher schools.

3. — **The protection accorded to economic development** was so efficacious, that these provinces were economically ruined by Russia. Before the war they possessed

hardly 2,04 km. of railroad per 100 km² (France had 9,3, England 12, Germany 11,4; even Congress Poland, neglected for strategical reasons, had 2,65 km. The arbitrary play of transport tariffs was so calculated that the exportation of grain from the depths of Russia cost less than from these provinces, and the milling industry was ruined in the same manner. It was the same with regard to live stock, so that Congress Poland was obliged to import it from the governments of Central Russia, to the neglect of Lithuania and White-Ruthenia, its natural furnishers. The ways of communication by land were in such a state of dilapidation, that the government of Wilno alone spent (according to the calculations of the Russian Wolfart, 1903) twice as much for the transports as they would have spent had good roads existed. This country, agricultural *par excellence*, possessed only one school of agriculture (at Horyhorki), and that a secondary school. The same country, with 32% of its total superficies in forests, did not possess a single school of forestry.

The extremely high custom duties rendered difficult the importation of agricultural machinery and tools, which were 100% dearer than in Germany. Thus the percentage of arable land in this country was scarcely 31,3%, while in Congress Poland it was 56%. The average production of rye in 1906-1910 was 6,0 quintals per hectare, while in Congress Poland it was 10,0 quintals and in Poznania 15,6 quintals. The White-Ruthenian provinces showed a permanent deficit in corn for bread, so that they often suffered from hunger.

The importance of such negligence in agricultural administration is all the greater because these provinces have no mines, and their industry was in such a rudimentary state that the annual value of industrial production per inhabitant was, on an average, hardly 10,9 roubles.

It is no wonder that, in the Russian budget, these provinces were passive to a very considerable degree. The average yearly deficit in their budget between 1868 and 1890 was 58 1/2 thousand roubles (according to the calculations of the Russian economist Jasnopolski); it subsequently rose to 33 millions (1906-1907) and in 1913 it had increased to 54 millions.

IV. — Conclusion

Comments are hardly necessary. The above quoted special laws, historic facts and official statistics speak for themselves and prove clearly :

1. — That the historical rights of Russia to Lithuania and White-Ruthenia have their origin in acts of violence, and are not older than one and a half centuries;

2. — That Russian ethnographic rights are founded only on the fact that the percentage of Russians in the provinces in question is nowhere higher than 5,08 %, and in some places only 3,32 %;

3. — That the Russian « civilizing protection » consisted in oppressing the local population, not only the Poles, but also the Lithuanians and the White-Ruthenians ; in lowering the level of education, and in systematically undermining the economic existence of this so beautiful but so unhappy country.

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